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Justice and Gender in Ministry: Debating Women's Ordination

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MUCH has been written on the question of ordaining women in the Roman Catholic Church. Catholic scholars of all stripes have debated issues such as the biblical sources for a theology of ordination; the relationship between sacramental and non-sacramental ministries; the limits of papal authority and the development of doctrine; and, more recently, the relationship between the elevation of an all-male, celibate clergy and the failure of Catholic bishops to address reported sexual abuse by priests. This essay focuses on the ethical implications of barring women from the priesthood. Although my references are to Catholic or Christian practices primarily, I explore two issues which have the potential to cut across denominational or creedal lines: the morality of sex-specific roles and the symbolic character of ordination.

Equality, Difference and Religious Leadership

A central issue in the ordination debate, particularly for feminist ethics, is whether reserving the priestly role to men is unjust. In his *Letter to Women*, issued in June of

1995 in advance of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, Pope John Paul II denounced the systematic exclusion of women's social, artistic and intellectual achievements from the historical record; apologized for the Church's contributions to the conditions which have justified violence against women; and argued for "real equality for women in every area: equal pay for equal work, protection for working mothers, fairness in career advancements, equality of spouses with regard to family rights and the recognition of everything that is part of the rights and duties of citizens in a democratic State."¹ His appeal to the fundamental equality of men and women and his support for women's economic and political rights reflects a growing acknowledgment in Roman Catholic social thought, particularly within the last forty years, of the sin of sexism. At the same time, in articulating the Church's position on the admission of women to the priesthood, the Pope clearly distinguishes between support for gender equity in such things as education, employment, and compensation, and the conclusion that ministerial roles in the

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church should be open to women as well as to men. The pastoral letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, issued in 1994, defends the restriction of the priestly role to men based on scriptural testimony of the election exclusively of male Apostles and the “constant practice of the Church which has imitated Christ in choosing only men.”² Other Vatican documents invoke symbols of Christ as the “bridegroom of the Church” in concluding that women cannot effectively represent Christ in the role of Eucharistic celebrant.³ Although it does not include the duties and privileges related to the priesthood, the role of women in the life and mission of the Church is praised throughout as “absolutely necessary and irreplaceable”.

Does defending an “ecclesial division of labor” in this way undermine the church’s commitment to the equality of women? Is the ban on women in the priesthood simply a consequence of accepting differences between men and women or is it another expression of the sexism the church ostensibly condemns? In “Probing the Politics of Difference,” Christine Gudorf notes that feminist political theorists like Iris Marion Young have defended an egalitarian politics of difference which includes “not only respect for social movements with separatist politics (e.g., the Black Power movement in the US in the late 1960s) but also tolerance for groups that maintain and even exaggerate differences by endorsing role exclusion, so long as exclusions do not undermine equality.”⁴ A “politics of difference” takes the critique of universal or essentialist ideals of justice as its starting point, arguing that the suppression of group differences often functions to oppress non-dominant groups. Agreeing with Young, Gudorf assumes that “some degree of exclusion is often essential to a politics of difference, if the politics of difference is about resisting assimilation.”⁵ Viewed in this context, sex-based differentiation of roles can be a just and legitimate strategy for maintaining difference.

The resistance of many feminists from the developing world to the standard

arguments of the contemporary Western women’s movement in favor of eradicating traditional sex-based roles in the home serves as a test case for the legitimacy of exclusion in service of equality. For these women, “the struggle in non-Western cultures to stave off domination by the modern developed world requires shoring up both of the complementary gendered poles of traditional culture. Most women, even most women within militant women’s organizations in the developing world, want to be liberated in—not from—their traditional roles as mothers and wives...”⁶ According to Gudorf, third world feminists accept motherhood as a primary and exclusive vocation for women, and celebrate women’s power not only as “givers of life” but also as shapers of the moral and spiritual life of the household. This acceptance should not be read as a retreat into a sentimental femininity, but as the elevation of a vocation that these feminists see as intimately related to their struggle against the various forms of oppression under which the people of the developing world live. They do not reject sexual differentiation as such but the use of sex roles to justify conditions which prevent them as women from carrying out their responsibilities to their families and their communities. Thus, they want to have access to other social roles, e.g., as small business owners, not because motherhood is unsatisfying or demeaning but because these roles allow them to realize their maternal aspirations for their children.

The critical question for Gudorf is: How are we to distinguish “role exclusion for the purpose of domination” from “role exclusion for the purpose of equality”? In other words, how do we recognize legitimate role exclusions that are aimed at resisting oppression by intentionally accentuating difference? She offers four criteria: balance; proportional cost/benefit; a process of participative decision-making; and narrow scope. Thus, the exclusion of one sex from a social role should be balanced by roughly parallel exclusions of the other sex from a role of approximately

equal power and importance. In addition, the opportunity costs or suffering to individuals should be less than the benefit of balanced exclusion to society as a whole. The process for deciding on exclusive roles should be both generally participative and respectful of the legitimate interests of minorities. Finally, the exclusive roles should be narrow and particular, not general and overarching. Role exclusions should be neither permanent nor understood in essentialist terms.⁷

In other places, Gudorf has suggested that it would be possible to imagine circumstances under which an all-male Catholic priesthood could serve the goal of sexual equality. Given that the sacraments are "religious rituals modeled on the material roles of women—birthing, feeding, caring for the sick and dying, and establishing and reconciling families," she argues, "[t]he male priesthood [could] be understood, at least in part, as an attempt to claim for males parallel ...power and right to birth and nurture."⁸ In making this case, she assumes that there would be a separate sacramental role for women of equal status and that ecclesial governance would be detached from the priestly role. When she applies the criteria above to the question of ordination in the Roman Catholic Church, however, she shows this tradition's sex-specific reservation of the priestly role fails the test of justice in several ways: the current position is that the exclusion of women from the priesthood is permanent; the rationale for exclusion is essentialist, i.e., predicated on the "natural" inability of women to represent Jesus; and, most important, exclusivity in role is correlated with unequal participation in the formal governance of the community. The latter is particularly important as it reflects a deep inconsistency with the tradition's own arguments concerning the importance of participation in governance in realizing equality.

Gudorf's analysis is especially useful in the debate over women's ordination in the Catholic Church because it recognizes the place of difference within work for equality. Unlike some feminist

arguments in the past, Gudorf's position does not presume that equality equals sameness. At the same time, she subjects arguments about role exclusivity to clearly articulated norms of justice. Therefore, she shifts the scrutiny from the motives of those who argue for restricting the priestly role to men to the results in terms of broader efforts to bring about social justice.

Identity, Change and Ordination

Another way of probing the ethical dimensions of ordination is to ask: What is the *symbolic* significance of a male priesthood for this community as a eucharistic community? What purposes do rules concerning ordination serve? Sociologist of religion Mark Chaves' research confirms what many people's experience suggests: that there is only a loose coupling between formal rules governing ordination and actual practice in congregational leadership and ministry. In other words, recognized ordination is only a small part of what actually defines opportunities for or conditions of ministry. Despite formal rules denying women access to certain religious roles, women in such communities often have many opportunities for ministry and leadership. At the same time, admission to ordination does not guarantee gender equality for women in clerical roles. This is true across Christian denominations, irrespective of how new or old debates about ordination are in the community.⁹

He notes, for example, the Church of God in Christ, a community which does not ordain women to be elders, pastors or bishops, but within which, according to theologian Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "women may teach the gospel to others and may have charge of a church in the absence of a pastor."¹⁰ While only men may 'preach', women may 'teach,' a symbolic distinction without any apparent difference in practice. As Gilkes puts it: "the public speaking of prominent women in this denomination is indistinguishable from the most exemplary 'preaching.'"¹¹ Citing

studies by Michael Hamilton, Chaves finds the same pattern in the history of American Protestant Fundamentalism: "Behind the strong rhetoric prohibiting women from engaging in public ministry, [we can find] numerous examples of women occupying public ministerial roles in local congregations, serving as faculty in Bible institutes, preaching to mixed-sex audiences at summer Bible conferences, serving as missionaries and traveling evangelists, and organizing their own special-purpose religious organizations."¹² The same thing is true within the Roman Catholic Church. Indeed, according to Chaves, "the vast majority of the 300 priestless Roman Catholic parishes in the United States are 'pastored' by women. These women function as priest in almost every sense, including presiding at worship and distributing communion."¹³ R. Stephen Warner captures the irony of these arrangements in observing that "religious organizations with restrictive gender rules may be the only organizations in our society that are more sexist in theory than in practice."¹⁴

On the other side of this loose coupling, liberal rules regarding admission to ordination do not translate directly into either equality or recognition in practice. Here again, Chaves' findings confirm the general impression that significant differences exist between ordained men and ordained women in access to choice parishes, reception by the community, and level of compensation. Congregationalists led the way in the United States, first ordaining a woman in 1853. Yet, according to Chaves, "as late as 1950 . . . only about three percent of its ministers were female."¹⁵ Universalists began ordaining women in 1863 and Unitarians began ordaining women in 1871. Still, "as late as 1974, only five of the approximately forty women clergy within the Unitarian Universalist Association pastored congregations, 'and these few were working for very low salaries, some of them earning their substandard incomes by serving in more than one church.'"¹⁶ Chaves cites a 1983

study of clergy in nine Christian denominations which found that "women were more likely to work part-time, and they were much less likely than men to have jobs as sole or senior pastors. When women did have jobs as sole or senior pastors, they were significantly more likely than men to have jobs in congregations that were small, located in rural areas, and financially precarious."¹⁷ Finally, and most sobering, Chaves suggests that market forces are in the end the most important factor governing the circumstances under which women assume ministerial posts. Whether "liberal" or "conservative," congregations turn to women to fill pastoral leadership roles when they are unable to hire a male minister, either because of a general clergy shortage or because they are not offering competitive salaries.

The interesting question here becomes: If they do not really regulate internal organizational practice, what do rules governing ordination do? Chaves argues that, above all, women's ordination policies signal certain loyalties.¹⁸ They are related to the way that denominations negotiate boundaries and respond to external pressures. They are part of a larger process through which denominations construct their communal identities in relation to other religious communities and with respect to the prevailing intellectual and cultural currents of their secular environments. Thus, according to Chaves, "prohibiting female ordination has become a way for a denomination to distance itself from the world of 'liberalism' [within which movements for women's equality arise] by displacing loyalty to an alternative environment—be it a transprotestant organized fundamentalism or a transnational organized sacramentalism."¹⁹ Assuming that he is correct, understanding the stance of a community like the Roman Catholic Church on women's ordination and appreciating what is at stake in debates within the community will not consist simply in exhausting theological arguments concerning representation. Resistance to women's ordination is part of the Catholic

Church's rejection of features of modernity, such as liberal feminism, consumerism, deepening intersections of technology and biology, and the elevation of individual autonomy, which the Catholic hierarchy identifies as threatening to institutional continuity and cohesion.

In "Finding One's Place in the Text: A Look at the Theological Treatment of Caste in Traditional India," Francis Clooney suggests some interesting analogies along these lines between the treatment of caste in Brahmanical texts and the treatment of women's ordination in Roman Catholic magisterial statements. Although we cannot do justice to his analysis here, it is interesting to briefly note the points of contact he identifies. Both rely on textual evidence for the exclusion of some persons or groups from particular roles that is held to be in some sense outside of worldly experience, but which does not imply any fundamental inequality between persons. More important, both can only be understood as involving the negotiation of social change: "In the theological realm, it is the ordination issue which [most] closely approximates the type of issue caste is as a Hindu *theological* topic: what is a community which has always interpreted text and tradition in a way designedly immune to the 'spirit of the times' supposed to do when society changes, when human nature is reappraised and new, vigorous religious voices heard?"²⁰ What they do, he argues, is to try to seek accommodations which leave intact the community's core religious values. Although it does not work the same way for all traditions, the interpretation of texts under changing social conditions, particularly texts which address visible and contested roles, is a boundary-marking enterprise.

Considering the function of rules governing admission to ministerial roles enriches and amplifies the field of debate over women's ordination. It explains, for example, why debates are so acrimonious and the positions so entrenched, and why they will not be resolved by textual retrieval alone. Chaves suggests that the question

"Can women be priests?" is indistinguishable from the questions "Who are we? In what form will this community survive into the future?" Highlighting these connections makes visible a moral dimension of the debate over women's ordination that is often overlooked, i.e., the morality of the stances a denomination takes with regard to external pressures, such as pressures toward gender equality, and the loyalties it forges in the face of change.

Ordination and the Prophetic Table

There is yet another way of considering the symbolism of a male-only priesthood, i.e., in relation to the prophetic or political character of Christian Eucharist. One of the central themes in Christian Eucharistic theology is that the Eucharistic meal is an enactment of the body of Christ. For Christians, "the basic sacramental action is to eat a ritual sacred meal together as a corporate body, [to enter into the corporate body of Christ] and thereby become transformed into Christ as the new creation."²¹ As sacramental theologian David Power expresses it, believing that "Christ takes body in the body of the Church, it is in the bodies of church members that he sacramentally manifests his oneness with the Church. The food and drink of his body and blood nourish and feed these bodies in the action of a table where all sit and eat and drink."²² In this rite, "Christ takes on a bodily form in those who in this sharing are his members so that he is present to the world as Body through these bodies."²³

Although we cannot do justice to all the implications of setting the question of women's ordination within this theological interpretation of the Eucharist, we can make some suggestions about how it might serve reflection on ordination practices. The first is that when we take the "enacted body" as our starting point, the table becomes "the centerpoint of proclamation, communion prayer, mutual inbeing and mission."²⁴ There are many disagreements among Christian theologians about what that

centrality means for the internal ordering of the church or for relations between communities. Certainly for the Catholic Church, such a framework raises questions not only about the role of women as presiders, but also about the participation of gay and lesbian and divorced-remarried Catholics in the Eucharist. However, if we believe that "Christ takes body in the body of the Church," and that the assembled body is therefore transformed, made "one", and, most important, "missioned," nothing that goes on at the table is ever unimportant or devoid of political significance. The "gift" of Eucharist as the unity of the body, as the healing of the hungry or broken body, has an inherently social and ethical dimension; it extends beyond the particular ritual context to embrace all of the community's social relations. As the late Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder expressed it: "the Eucharist is the paradigm for every mode of inviting the outsider and the underdog to the table. The Eucharist extends the boundaries of economic solidarity, normally restricted to the family, to include the widow, stranger, orphan, alien and hungry. At the Lord's table, those who have bread bring it, and all are fed, that is the model for the Christian social vision in all times and places."²⁵

We can debate what exactly it means for "Christ to be present to the world as Body" through the body of the community. However, if Powers is correct, "Christ's embodiment in the Church prophetically calls into question the adoption of any social ordering which retains status distinctions or marginalizes some of its members."²⁶ Thus, for the Catholic Church, defense of an all-male priesthood must at least account for the failure of the Eucharistic table to transform existing social relations of exclusion and to reflect a "new order" between men and women.

Conclusion

Examining the ethical implications of rules governing admission to ordination highlights the role such rules play in defining ecclesial

commitments as well as in shoring up ecclesial identities against social changes that are perceived to be threatening. Debates over scriptural sources for a theology of priesthood are important, but such debates can neglect the broader stakes in the ordination debate and miss opportunities to challenge exclusionary policies from the perspective of their participation in established social relations of injustice. "Can Women Be Priests?" is a deeply theological question for Christians, having everything to do with the way the community will experience the "lived body of Christ." It is also an ethical question that can be asked across confessional boundaries, not, as some assume, the question of whether women and men must always be treated the same, but whether and in what way ordination will serve the work of justice.

Notes

¹ Pope John Paul II, *Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women* (June 29, 1995), No. 4; available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_29061995_women_en.html.

² Pope John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, *Origins* 24 (June 9, 1994):50-52.

³ See, e.g., Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration Inter Insigniores on the question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood* (October 15, 1976): AAS 69 (1977): 98-116.

⁴ Christine E. Gudorf, "Probing the Politics of Difference: What's Wrong with an All-Male Priesthood?", *Journal of Religious Ethics* 27/3 (Fall 1999): 377-405.

⁵ Gudorf, "Probing the Politics of Difference," p. 380.

⁶ Gudorf, "Probing the Politics of Difference," p. 391.

⁷ Gudorf, "Probing the Politics of Difference," p. 399.

⁸ As quoted in Gudorf, "Probing the Politics of Difference," p. 389. See also, Gudorf, "The Power to Create: Sacraments and Men's Need to Birth," *Horizons: The Journal of the College Theology Society* 14/2 (1987): 296-309.

⁹ Mark Chaves, "The Symbolic Significance of Women's Ordination," *The Journal of Religion* 77/1 (January 1997): 87-114.

¹⁰ Chaves, "The Symbolic Significance of Women's Ordination," p. 95.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² See Michael S. Hamilton, "Women, Public Ministry, and American Fundamentalism, 1920-1950," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 3 (1993): 171-196 at 180; as cited in Chaves, "The Symbolic Function of Women's Ordination," p. 93.

¹³ Chaves, "The Symbolic Function of Women's Ordination," p. 94.

¹⁴ R. Stephen Warner, "Women's Place, Women's Space," paper presented at the American Sociological Association meeting (Washington, D.C., August 1990); as quoted in Chaves, "The Symbolic Function of Women's Ordination," p. 95.

¹⁵ Chaves, "The Symbolic Function of Women's Ordination," p. 96.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*; citing Cynthia Grant Tucker, "Women and the Unitarian-Universalist Ministry," in Catherine Wessinger, ed., *Religious Institutions and Women's Leadership: New Roles inside the Mainstream* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), pp. 93-94, emphasis in original.

¹⁷ Chaves, "The Symbolic Function of Women's Ordination," p. 96. For a personal account of the reception of women pastors see Mary Hannah Rowe, "Thirty Years of Women's Ordination," *dialog: A Journal of Theology* 39/3 (Fall 2000): 206-213.

¹⁸ Chaves, "The Symbolic Function of Women's Ordination," p. 111.

¹⁹ Chaves, "The Symbolic Function of Women's Ordination," p. 107.

²⁰ Francis X. Clooney, "Finding One's Place in the Text: A Look at the Theological Treatment of Caste in Traditional India," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 17/1 (Spring 1989): 1-29, at 24.

²¹ Sidney Callahan, "The Nuptial Body," *Commonweal* 123/5 (3/8/96): 7-9.

²² David N. Power, "Roman Catholic Theologies of Eucharistic Communion: A Contribution to Ecumenical Conversation," *Theological Studies* 57 (1996): 587-610 at 601-602.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Power, "Roman Catholic Theologies of Eucharistic Communion," p. 608.

²⁵ John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations: Essays Evangelical and Public* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 57. As quoted in Matthew Whelan, "The Responsible Body: A Eucharistic Community," *CrossCurrents* 51/3 (2001): 359-378 at 372.

²⁶ Whelan, "The Responsible Body," p. 373.